

A young Việt Kiều's (Overseas Vietnamese) Identity in Global Vietnamese Contexts Julia Ha

Die Identität einer jungen "Việt Kiều" (Übersee Vietnamesin) im Kontext des globalen Vietnams

Die vorliegende Arbeit präsentiert einen Rückblick bestehend aus Teilen der Selbstreflexionsanalysen der Autorin und ihrer Forschungsarbeit als vietnamesisch-österreichische Studentin in Vietnam und in Österreich. Dieser Beitrag stammt aus dem Dissertationsprojekt der Autorin mit dem Titel „Two Worlds One Origin – A Comparative Study Of Vietnamese Women Living In Vietnam And Abroad“. Dabei geht es um unerwartete Herausforderungen, Schwierigkeiten und Überraschungen mit denen sich die Autorin auseinandersetzen musste, während sie mit Teilnehmerinnen aus Vietnam und vietnamesischen Teilnehmerinnen im Ausland, narrative biographische Interviews durchführte. Insgesamt hat die Dissertantin der Universität Innsbruck 54 Interviews mit Frauen zwischen 18 und 59 Jahren geführt: 33 Interviews in Vietnam und 21 außerhalb Vietnams. In diesem Artikel werden auch die verschiedenen Perspektiven, die die Autorin während des Forschungsprozesses als „insider/outsider“ erlebt hat, in den Blick genommen.

This piece of work presents a flashback that contains parts of self-reflective analysis of the author and her research as a female Viet-Austrian graduate student in Vietnam and Austria. This paper stems from a research project of the author's dissertation entitled "Two Worlds One Origin – A Comparative Study Of Vietnamese Women Living In Vietnam And Abroad". It is about unexpected challenges, difficulties and surprises the author had to struggle with while conducting narrative biographical interviews with female participants from Vietnam, and Vietnamese women living abroad. Overall the graduate student of the University of Innsbruck conducted 54 interviews with women between 18 and 59 years: 33 interviews in Vietnam and 21 outside of Vietnam. This article also addresses different perspectives the author experienced being an "insider / outsider" during the process of conducting research.

This narrative stems from a research project I conducted for my dissertation. In the first period of my research I conducted 33 interviews with women across Vietnam aged 18 to 59. Through the method of biographical narratives, I was able to skim the surface of these women's everyday lives, and glimpse the challenges of being a woman in Vietnam in this day and age. The second part of the research comprised 21 interviews with Vietnamese women in the age range of 27 to 54 living in countries such as Austria (Vorarlberg), Switzerland (canton of St. Gallen) and Germany (Baden-Württemberg). The selection of this group was standing to reason, since I grew up in West Austria and my family lives there, which meant I was very close to the Vietnamese community in this region.

For my dissertation the topics of education, occupation and family life are central. Because of this I decided to use biographical interviews, in order to have a broad and open field to work in. I was interested in the change and development of a Vietnamese migrant from a female perspective. Questions such as the following inspired me to start my dissertation:

1. Does the position of a woman in her family change in a foreign country?
2. Is there a better chance for women to enter their desired professional field?
3. Is there any change in their position and placement compared to that in their country of origin?

This narrative is also about the challenges I faced, and the constantly changing perception of myself and my position I experienced conducting the interviews. In the beginning I believed myself to be an insider, but it quickly became apparent that I was actually an outsider both ways, in Vietnam and in Austria. In the end I settled into a happy medium of being a semi-insider and semi-outsider, depending on whom I was talking to. In speaking about the difficulties, challenges and surprises, I shall touch on some issues that were raised during my work in Vietnam and in Austria. Identities, cultural differences, family hierarchy including respect towards elderly and



image 1: rice field

This image was taken on the way to the Mekong Delta while sitting at the back seat of an old rickety Honda motorbike. It shows a group of women during rice cultivating - a traditional women labor in rural areas.

manners towards younger community members, are some of these issues I will elaborate on in this narrative.

“I am many” – Identities

I cannot recall how many times I have tried to change my own identity throughout my life in order to attract the least attention possible. My answers to questions such as, “do you feel more Austrian or Vietnamese?” would invariably be determined by the person who was asking me. If it was somebody from Austria, it would always be: “Definitely Austrian, I feel at home

in Austria, as I grew up here, and I don’t know anything else”. However, if it was a Vietnamese person asking, my answer would be: “I am Vietnamese, I was born in Vietnam, how can I ever forget my country of birth?” The fact is, I really was born in Vietnam, but when I was one month old, my parents took me on a fishing cutter with them and we escaped as boat people to Malaysia and from there later to Austria, where I grew up. Both answers, therefore, suited me, they were right and honest and true for me.

Not until I started my research for my dissertation in psychology did I give a second thought to what I considered myself to be in terms of a hybrid identity. In this context hybrid Identity is to be taken as a mixed identity of Vietnamese – Austrian. For Bhaba (1994) identities are per se hybrid as they evolve from a space, the Inbetween, a space where different cultures meet. Habermas (1988) likewise emphasised the importance of culture and stressed that the concept of hybrid identities is based on a dynamic cultural term:

It understands culture as a process in which the lifeworlds (Lebenswelten) are consistently altered through cultural knowledge and as a result of trade and negotiations. Such a dynamic notion of culture makes it possible to make a distinguish observation of cultural adoption and exchange processes which can range from an adoption of Western culture to self-assertion against Western culture. (in Westermann, 2006: 85-86)

I was therefore not even aware that I always had a different answer when these topics were raised. Much to my surprise, the more I started to engage with that topic and these subject matters, the more I realized that I did not know as much as I thought I knew about my country of birth. The questions about my own culture that could possibly help me find the key to my identity dilemma began to multiply, and my interest in finding answers increased. Appropriately, Abu-Lughod (1991) uses the term “halfie” to describe the identities and experiences of researchers “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, parentage” (in Subedi, 2006:573). As Louie (2000) notes regarding his own research, I also found that although my research was not a study about me, I ended up learning very much about myself.

While growing up, our family had tried to integrate as seamlessly as possible. The image that the society we lived in had of us was very important to my parents. On the outside everything had to be white and spotless, especially as an immigrant family. Once they returned to their own house, however, without any intruding outside observers, my parents became the same old Vietnamese people they had been before they arrived in Austria. This meant that behind closed doors we had Vietnamese food, spoke the Vietnamese language, listened to Vietnamese folk songs and received a traditional Vietnamese upbringing. The highest principle of the traditional Vietnamese upbringing is to uphold the hierarchy in the family, which is made up of the strict observance of the three basic relations between father & son (cha con), husband & wife (vợ chồng) and the elderly brother/sister (anh/

em) and the younger brother/sister. The strict observance of these has its roots in the Confucian moral doctrines. The above-mentioned three relationships characterize the social commitment and are also named as the “three chains” of Confucianism.

I did not like the Vietnamese part of myself. My siblings and I developed an anti-Vietnamese attitude during our childhood and early adolescence. I was embarrassed for my parents’ poor German language skills yet when in public I would speak to them in German in order to prove to others that we did understand the language. I was ashamed of being Vietnamese, but mostly what I was ashamed of, was simply being different. All I wanted was to be like everybody else.

“Opposed characters”

I was the first born of my family, which means that my duty was to serve my parents and act as a role model for my siblings. As a daughter I also had to support the family’s income, which is why my father had the very specific vision of me running an Asian store or a Chinese restaurant. Looking back now, I realize how far my parents were forced to step out of their traditional way of thinking. It was not only a challenge to convince them it would pay off in the end for them to let me follow a serious academic career, but it was also a challenge for them to defend and to justify their support of my chosen path to the rest of the family and in their Vietnamese community. As I continued along my chosen path the feelings of ambivalence on their part only increased.

My family came from a small, undereducated countryside village and their life was strongly influenced by the tradition of Confucianism. Moving to and living in a totally different society in a European country presented the difficult challenge of raising their children in a way that would ensure they would not lose face in public, while still maintaining their own traditions and doctrines. Once the Vietnamese families in our neighbourhood realized that education was

the solution for moving beyond the working class and becoming wealthy, my parents tried to provide me with everything I needed for my academic training. Moreover, it became somewhat of a status symbol to let their children attend university. In my case, it proved to be a difficult balancing act of showing my parents respect and obedience, while living my life. In Vietnamese society although sometimes attitudes of children and parents differ in the end the parents' opinions are always the right ones and are as such indisputable. To contradict the parents is regarded as disobedience and must be avoided (Pham, 1999). Thus, even today, it is still complicated for me to discuss certain issues with my parents because of their difficulties to think outside of the box. They justify their opinion with many generalizations and my efforts to try and open their minds and strip them of their blinders usually fail.

“I am many” – Functions

I was not aware that I was constantly switching between “family-first-born-daughter-mode” and “western-student-mode”. Having many identities, and choosing to let them out in different situations, is not a talent but a natural reaction and it happens subconsciously. For me, there was never a struggle in the changing of identities, and it does not take a lot of effort to do so, because that is what I have always done, and I know no other way to live. Not until I started to reflect on my attitudes and behaviour, did I realize that there are indeed a lot of ambivalences and contrasts as well as a lot of questions, which are still unanswered.

The issue is not about how to associate the changing identities, but about the consequences and the results of changing back and forth into different societies, as well as how to behave appropriately in the situation, while changing positions within a family hierarchy. There is the family hierarchy where the children are the lowest level of the pyramid and have to obey the rules of the family. For example, it is still

common for the children to act as interpreters in many families. But what I experienced as an interpreter for my parents was that I also took on the responsibility for certain decisions. I had no problem in translating things for my parents, but when the outcome was not satisfactory for them, it became my fault, because I must have translated something not properly, thus preventing them from being able to react immediately. Once the vocabulary went beyond every-day life conversations, it became tricky to translate foreign words or abstract concepts. I often found myself justifying things I didn't have any influence on or wasn't even involved in to begin with. Even if I did not want to translate, I had to because they needed my translation and relied on me.

I only recognized recently, that what I experienced was not unique. I wish I had shared my doubts and thoughts with other children who were going through the same experiences. On the other hand, while I was going through that phase, I was also refusing to be Vietnamese. Looking back, I am ashamed of my behaviour in the past and how my reaction influenced the manner of my siblings. I cannot explain why I thought that being Vietnamese was so negative and people would think I was less valuable or less likable. I know now I put other opinions and ideals over mine. It was when I realized this that I recognized that I was not able to express thoughts of my own. What I had wanted for myself had always been determined by others; constantly aware of not being accepted, was my biggest worry. I realized at that point, that I did not even know what I was or who I was.

How alien is familiar?

Years later I found myself in the village where I was born. Armed with a dictionary and a tape recorder and some questions written on a piece of paper I was sitting on the porch of my grandmother's, who had died several years before. Her youngest son had moved into her house. Convinced that I was going to have a

large number of willing volunteers for my dissertation interviews, I was overly optimistic.

I was aware of my limited Vietnamese, but since my parents understood me, I thought it would be enough to get by. I was introduced to everybody as the daughter of Thuy (my mother's first name) the granddaughter of Ba Gioi (the address form for elderly women and the first name of my grandmother) and I received a very warm welcome. I got on very well with the villagers and went to the market everyday. Because I was introduced to all the women as 'Thuy's daughter, the granddaughter of Ba Gioi, the one who died 6 years ago,' I failed to notice that I was first being called a "Việt Kiều" (= Overseas Vietnamese) and only then introduced by my Vietnamese first name and family connection. This classification and the assumption that I neither spoke nor understood Vietnamese was an eye-opening experience. My persistent attempts at convincing them that I did understand and speak Vietnamese went unnoticed. Even though it seemed as if I was being accepted by everyone, I was in fact, only being tolerated temporarily. As if there was a code on how to treat "Việt Kiều" I was being treated very differently.

That was when I realized, that no matter how much I tried to be one of them, I was far away from being Vietnamese in their eyes. This added a new layer of ambivalence to my already confused feelings. All my life I had been listening to my parents preaching to me that I could never be Austrian because I didn't look Austrian, and therefore I should not pretend to be Austrian. Indeed during my childhood I had defined being Vietnamese as inferior to being Austrian. My parents imagined that Austrians were more intelligent than the Vietnamese. The evidence for their belief was the highly developed standard of living in Austria.

So there I was neither a Vietnamese nor an Austrian, but definitely a "Việt Kiều"- a label which I knew the literal translation for, but had yet to live and experience the true significance of, for the Vietnamese and for myself.

A "Việt Kiều" at "home"

When "Việt Kiều" would announce that they would be going back to Vietnam to visit their relatives, they would always say, "I'm going home this summer, I'm going home to Vietnam."

Even I found myself using that phrase without noticing that I chose the words "back home to Vietnam". There I was "at home", in a place where I had been once for a four-week visit while my grandmother was still alive. Ten years later I had arrived in Vietnam the second time to conduct my interviews. "Back at home", - a place I had no connection to, but had always defined as home, simply because everybody else had. I experienced a nondescript feeling that was a mix of being on very familiar ground that was simultaneously very foreign. In real life I had no connection to this place, there were no memories or experiences I had made in the past and yet, I felt incredibly at ease and content being there. Before arriving, I had made my connections to this place in my head, in my vision of what it would be like to live in Vietnam. Since this place had always existed in my imagination, I had established a connection with it. That was why when I was there, it felt like being home. For this reason exactly, I felt like I belonged to and was part of the whole village community, I was one of them - at least in my own vision.

I did see how from the standpoint of the villagers, my life was very different and why, as a result, they treated me differently. I assumed, however, that having the same birth-place, would give me the permission to enter the world of the village community seamlessly. This was, of course, an illusion.

In retrospect it makes sense to me, why all the women I asked to allow me to interview them refused to talk to me. When I first arrived in my hometown I had my parents' help to ask for interviews. The women did not immediately refuse the request, but rather tried to get out of the situation gracefully. All of them came for the appointment however they all came in order to explain in a very eloquent way why they would

not be able to be part of my project. It was a very neat way to avoid being rude and flat-out refusing, because how could they ever refuse to be helpful, especially when a Việt Kiều was asking them for a favour? Their explanations as to why they could not give me an interview ranged from

my life is so uninteresting, you would just be very bored about my story (elderly women from Mekong Delta, Vietnam)

to

I want your dissertation to be very good, because you are the only one in our village who made it so far, yet looking at my life story, I don't think it would be an adequate story for your dissertation, because I cannot offer you anything special or unique (elderly women from Mekong Delta, Vietnam).

Despite all of my efforts to assure the women that it was not a contest for whose life story was better or worse, I could not make them speak to me. All my endeavours failed miserably. The more I tried to allay their concerns, the more they were convinced that they were not suitable for my interview and insisted that they would bring bad luck for my dissertation. It was as if their hands were tied, as if they officially wanted to, but they simply could not. It would be for my benefit if they were not to take part in my project - that was what they tried to make me see.

This unforeseen roadblock meant I was forced to think about why I was failing and I began to realize that to begin with, I definitely needed to work on my language problems. The image of the smart student started to fade and I lost credibility when it became apparent that I couldn't even speak proper Vietnamese.

In hindsight, I realize that I had proceeded with almost no preparation for and knowledge of the life situation and behavioural customs of the local Vietnamese. Firstly, I had thought of myself as an insider, because I was a member of a local family. Needless to say, my intention to conduct research the way I had learned to at the uni-

versity in Austria did not work out. I have since realized that I was not far enough removed to be a stranger, but also not close enough to be a member of the community. It would have been great fodder for the village gossip circles and I now see that the women feared they would be the talk of the town, if they had participated. Furthermore, they did not trust me, even when I assured them, that anonymity would be guaranteed - of course I was too naïve to realize that such a promise was impossible to keep, as there is no anonymity in small villages such as these. They also could not trust me, because I was a member of an indigenous family and their reputation was at risk if anything they told me in the interview were to reach the ears of my family members. Above all, however, I do really believe what they were saying about thinking they were not special enough for my project.

It was exactly this excuse that I had to face months later, when I tried to interview women with a low level of education and similar living conditions in Saigon. Not until later I also found out, that the word "interview" which I was using as a literal translation had negative connotations. For them, an interview was connected with an interrogation, which the locals naturally learned to fear and dread in the times immediately following the reunification. Despite this, I was forced to ask myself if it would have made a difference if I had been a real western student (with the according physical appearance) in a white coat and a western camera team and a translator. I can imagine if that had that been the case, they probably would have granted me the interview, as they would have seen themselves as something interesting and special for a foreign research project.

A "Việt Kiều's" suitable research method?

As my Vietnamese began to improve (thanks to classes I was taking at the university in Saigon) I became more and more aware of what it is like to be a "Việt Kiều" through Vietnamese eyes. Not only were there many stereotypes

and prejudices about the term “Việt Kiều”, but I also noticed that being a “Việt Kiều” granted access to a variety of places that locals had to struggle to get in to, mostly because of a lack in financial means. This unequal situation has led to a non-uniform appearance of “Việt Kiều” and causes “Việt Kiều” to attract attention in every possible way.

My accidental meeting with Vietnam’s main daily newspaper editor provided to be a windfall opportunity for using the news media to call for willing interviewees. At the end of an article about my academic career as a Viet-Austrian student, published in the newspaper one day, a call was made for volunteers. Contrary to my expectations I received an overwhelming number of responses from interested women, who were very keen to help me with my dissertation project. Practically overnight I had more participants than I could handle.

Thrilled that I was finally going to conduct the work I had meant to start 4 months earlier, I started to prepare properly for this round of interviews.

Language, Appellation and Setting

Deciding to avoid the question of whether I was more Austrian or more Vietnamese, I simply accepted that while conducting my research in Vietnam, I was a “Việt Kiều”, regardless of the definition this term held for me personally. As a “Việt Kiều” I was able to apologize for various facts. I could admit that I did not know all the specific terminology when talking to experts and I could ask for their understanding in advance. In this way I pointed out my shortcomings first, in order to use them as excuses for whatever inappropriate or awkward moments might follow. In the end, this approach and admission of my background made me more confident of what I was doing.

Sometimes I would use the wrong form of address, but because I was a “Việt Kiều” I could get away with such flaws easily. In retrospect,

being a “Việt Kiều” meant also to be an advantage in terms of inappropriate questions or behaviour. I was allowed and sometimes encouraged to ask for anything I wanted to know or for anything I didn’t understand. I was no longer anxious compared to my first failed attempt and the more confidence I showed, the more at ease the women I interviewed became. Much to my surprise at the time, although logical in retrospect, all the women I interviewed were highly educated, had several university degrees or were extremely successful in their profession. These women were not necessarily my target group, since I was aware they were not representing the average Vietnamese woman. Then again, it was clear that women who had access to internet (their first contact with me was via email) and read the newspaper were not exactly the average working-class women I had hoped to meet.

Because I knew that the setting of the interview also had an impact on the participant, the seriousness of the subject and the credibility of my study, I wanted to meet in a place where I could achieve this. Firstly, I wanted a quiet and respectable place. Secondly I wanted to return the favour they were doing me in their willingness to be part of my project, by inviting them for a cup of coffee or tea. The only coffeehouse that I found to be ideal for the interviews was in the lobby of the legendary Rex Hotel, conveniently situated in the heart of the first district of Saigon. Once again I underlined my classification of being a “Việt Kiều” with this choice. The Rex Hotel was considered a noble place and through the years it has even become a popular tourist attraction. I could not have made it more obvious that I was a foreign student without any regard for history and appropriate behaviour. In retrospect, the Rex Hotel might have been an unsuitable place given its history in the American war. Nonetheless, it confirmed my image of a “Việt Kiều” and served to prove that most of the “Việt Kiều” live in wealthy conditions and must certainly lead an affluent life style, which is of course not true. Then again, I was a “Việt Kiều” who could, even as a student, afford the invitations.

The reactions of the participants were different and varied depending on age. Many of the elderly women would not allow me to buy them their coffee, as it is improper to be invited by a younger student who does not yet earn money. I had to give in because they insisted that I was above all a guest, and guests are mostly invited. Through the buying and inviting ritual I came to realize that I didn't need that procedure at all. In general I was working on an academic project so none of the participants were thinking of being refunded any way. Generally they seemed astonished that I was making such a big deal out of it, when it was clear from the beginning that this was about science and not business.

Nonetheless, I did not want it to seem as if I was using the women and abusing their time in order to get good material for my dissertation. Having the women sitting from 1 to sometimes 3 hours is indeed a long time, and if I had conducted the interviews with "Westerners", I would have at least given them something in return, even if only as symbolic gesture of thanks.

Lastly, the idea of doing interviews in an open coffeehouse was a practical decision, since the university couldn't provide me with a room where I could conduct my interviews. Many of my interviews were conducted with students about to complete their academic degree and I found it surprisingly easy to get straight to the main topics with them. It was interesting to experience that many young women were surprised by my Vietnamese as well as by my willingness to choose a career over a family.

Some of them offered to speak in English with me, if my Vietnamese was inadequate. Before I met up with the women I always phoned them in advance to be sure I was going to meet a woman and not a man. This was one of the biggest cultural discoveries I had in Vietnam: Vietnamese first names apply to both sexes. I found that out the hard way when I set up an interview with a paediatrician whom I didn't phone in advance. The supposed SHE turned out to be a HE. Thankfully

the paediatrician found the mix up very funny too.

Finally I was succeeding in my plans and could finish the interviews. The next passages will address some analyses and interpretations of the interviews I made. Combined with quotations of interviewees in Vietnam and Austria the next paragraphs will highlight some contraries in terms of generation and gender.

"Generation Fast Food" meets "Generation Pho" (traditional Vietnamese noodle soup)

The differences between Vietnam's generations are ever-present and markedly distinctive. The "generation fast food" a term that I would use for the younger generation seems bent on catching up with extraordinary passion and speed. The more the better and the sooner the better - this attitude is to be found in almost every possible intent and purpose. This ambivalence as it plays out in the modern Vietnamese woman is clearly visible through the Vietnamese women's magazines, as Drummond (2004) points out in his discussion of the key sources of identity in contemporary society.

When I would raise the topic of multitasking and being overly ambitious many young women answered that since they experienced so much unemployment and dependency within their family, the only way to overcome the problem was to know how to make a good living. Even if they described themselves as emancipated young women, after marriage the traditional mind-set takes over again and family life becomes more important to them than a professional career. One young woman who I interviewed described her vision of a perfect woman as follows:

I am allowed to do everything which pleases me, I can even date whom I want before I get married. I am a good student, which means that I am in line for a good job. It would be even better if I could prove foreign experience. You know, before marriage a Vietnamese girl can do almost everything she wants,



image 2: young women

This picture was taken at my farewell party during Karaoke singing. It shows three of my interviewees who represents the young urban Vietnamese women group.

From left to right: Hien (22) from Mui Ne works in a travel agency, Diem (20) a student from Hai Phong, Phuong (27) a receptionist from Saigon

but once she gets married she needs to be a good daughter-in-law. Every girl wants to get married. My husband and my future family will be the most important thing. On the weekend I want my husband and I to switch off the mobile phones and spend precious time with the family. I think to raise a family and to keep the family together is the most important job of a woman. Of course it is also a husband's job to take part in it, but he also has to take care of the income, so he will be excused if he has a lot of work to do (Vietnamese woman, 21, interviewed in Vietnam).

Other women were very convinced that women should only do housework and care for the children, emphasizing that men are simply not made for such work. A different student admitted:

My parents encouraged me to go to the University. According to them I should study economics or anything related to it in order to become a manager. I wanted to go to university, but I hated economics, I'd rather wanted to become a social worker. I wanted to study sociology or something like that, but I knew I would upset my parents if I would refuse to study economics. So I graduated in economics and then I started to study sociology, because by that time I had already done what they have expected from me (Vietnamese woman, 23, interviewed in Vietnam).

This attitude of not opposing the parents is very common, since "hieu" (filial piety) is part of every child's education. I myself know this desire to please everybody all too well. There is always an ambivalence when doing something for yourself, which does not fit into the collective image.

O' Harrow describes a typical example of how a mother's influence works:

(...) the mother plays on the sympathy of the child, making the child feel culpable for the sadness of the mother, eternally responsible for her suffering. For example, instead of telling the child directly that he must eat his bowl of beans (which the child detests) because they are good for his health (which the child might refuse), the mother says that she worked many hours to acquire the money to buy beans, that she sacrificed buying something for herself with the bean money instead, that she slaved over a hot stove to cook the beans, and if the child does not eat them, his ingratitude will (as usual) kill her (O' Harrow, 1995:173).

Invoking ingratitude is well known to me, since my parents used it so often, when I misbehaved. 'I should obey, because they risked their life to offer us children a better life' is a very powerful argument indeed.

Throughout the interviews with the younger women I saw many similarities in their struggles to find their own identity. The extraordinarily positive image of the West also existed in their heads like it had in mine during my childhood. Many of the interviewed women asked me if it was true that husbands in the West also do housework. Another girl asked me Sister is it true that women get served before men in a Western restaurant? The obsession to look Western and to behave like a Westerner was also very familiar to me. Once, a famous Viet-German TV presenter Minh-Khai Phan Thi said in an interview, that as a child she too longed to have blond hair and blue eyes. Some of the young students I interviewed had gone so far

as to invent Western first names for themselves and insisted on being called by those. I remember my own baptism at the age of 7 very well, because that was when I received my catholic first name. I was very proud of my new western name, because I sounded less alien.

What is it about the negative self-perception of being Vietnamese? I must emphasize that the women I interviewed in Vietnam are mostly from the urban area, where the Western influence has of course had a greater effect than in rural countryside. A very common image is that of the girl's school-uniform, the traditional Ao-Dai (traditional costume) that is replaced with cut-off jeans and holder-neck shirts right after school. The issue of switching back and forth from modern to traditional identities was all too familiar to me.

Trying to combine modern life with traditional life was a real problem for Vietnamese women, because the rapid development does not only affect the women, but also the men. When in their youth, the younger generation prefer to live a pro western lifestyle, but as soon as it matters and their life gets more serious, young men and women prefer to revert to the traditional way of living. Like one young woman told me

I am a very good student. I like my life and I am very curious. That is why I lost my virginity and I regret that very much, because now I am afraid that I will never get married. Indeed young people are more open nowadays, but nobody wants to marry 'damage goods'. I thought I was quite equal to the men, until I made the biggest mistake. Now I have to pay the price and suffer (Vietnamese woman, 21, interviewed in Vietnam).

In many of their narratives I saw connections and similarities, and I identified with them. It reminded me of when my parents tried to make me see that it is indeed very honourable to be an intelligent young woman, but that would scare the men who want to marry you. Nobody wants a wife who is smarter than the husband. He would loose face in society. If someone is

still unmarried during a reasonable age, the women is stigmatized for her "failure" not to have found a suitable husband, since women can only be a "complete" adult when becoming wives and then mothers (Belanger, 2004).

Another young woman told me a different story about difficulties in her marriage brought about because they are both members of a culture union.

After every board-meeting, we had a fight, because I always had better ideas than my husband, for example how to minimize our costs or new ideas for festivals etc. I was so tired of all the fighting I started to tell him my ideas at home, so he could raise those ideas in the board-meeting in order to make others believe that these ideas were his. That is the secret of a successful wife. You know it's simple like the old proverb says: the husband is the head of the family, but the wife is his neck, she can turn his neck wherever she wants (Vietnamese woman, 33, interviewed in Austria).

Ngo Thi Ngan Binh sums up the issues well in her description of the term "speed culture":

Young people speed up with enjoying their youthful years, fulfilling their dreams, climbing fast in their chosen professional paths (...). In terms of romance, going from one relationship to another is neither a novelty nor a taboo anymore (...). This "speed culture" is clearly a big challenge to any attempt to preserve the traditional tu duc ideals (4 virtues of Confucianism) which denounced free interaction between the two sexes and emphasized female domesticity. (...) In fact, while a traditional upbringing is still required of a good daughter, formal education is now also viewed as being equally important because it opens future opportunities for her. (...) today's mothers exempt their daughter from the burden of housework (...) that their daughters can now devote more time to their studies (Ngo, 2004: 54-55).

Once they become married the traditional way of thinking takes over and the newly married wife struggles through the expected manners and virtues a traditional wife has to bring with.

Fact Box

Confucian morality stated that a woman's life was subjected to the "three duties" and "four virtues". The three duties are as follows: as a girl, a daughter owed unconditional obedience to her father, when she was married, a wife had similarly to obey her husband and when her husband died, a widow had to obey her eldest son. In the Vietnamese language the four virtues are called DUNG, NGON, HANH and CONG, which signify the following: DUNG (appearance) states that a woman should behave blamelessly and correctly, live in everyone's agreement and be accurate and clean. NGON (Speech) means that words and speeches of the woman should sound comfortable to the ear. Her diction should be soft. She should avoid cusses and shrill voices. HANH (conduct) describes the well behaviour of a woman. Towards the elder person she should behave respectful and opposite the younger she should be acquiescent. CONG (housework) claims a woman should be deft at work, not only in sewing, embroidering, weaving, trading and cooking, but in every kind of activity (cp. Nietzsche, 1997)

It seems like there is a limit for the "fast food generation", and the "pho generation" (older generation) still runs deep in Vietnam's society. Living according to Confucius who said, "it doesn't matter how slowly you go as long as you don't stop" seems to be spot on for the older generation. "Pho" needs more time to boil and prepare, but it stills one's hunger far longer than a burger does.

Volunteer or social desirability?

After accomplishing the interviews in Vietnam I returned to Austria where I had no problem finding volunteers to be interviewed. My very helpful parents wanted me to finish my dissertation as soon as possible, and thus they insisted on helping me in recruiting the women.

This interview group consisted mostly of refugees from the refugee group who came

to Austria at the same time as my family. In the community I had always been called "Be Lan," which means Baby Lan, because I was the youngest member of the Viet community at that time. Through the years my nickname remained and at the age of 33, people still call me "Be Lan". Of course when my parents asked their female friends to allow me to interview them none refused.

I could never figure out if they truly wanted to grant me the interview or if they agreed to, to please my parents. The over-eagerness of the women in my mother's age group was almost frightening. My visits to their houses or apartments on my own always raised attention. I had never visited my parents' friends on my own, so for them as for me it was a special situation. It was still hard for the women to recognize me as a grown woman instead of Be Lan. This is what I found to be the most difficult aspect of conducting research in your own community. To remain serious and professional during an interview, while being told how cute I was and what a lovely baby I was, was indeed a challenge. The fact that I was a really close member of our community, and everyone watched my academic career like a hawk, made me think of how much this fact would affect and influence the interview situations.

The stereotypes about psychology and the ability to read other peoples minds still existed in the heads of these women. I once had to swear that I was unable to read a participant's minds. Despite all of this, I enjoyed the interviews with the Viet community in Europe and often received genuine encouragement, which was very flattering.

Conclusion

The key experiences and mistakes I made in the process of conducting my research stemmed from the fact that I infrequently reflected on my actions and presence. The problem of being authentic was another issue, as I still do not know what I consider myself to be in terms

of identity and image. Some of the difficulties I encountered could easily have been avoided, starting with my own miscalculation, and my insufficient preparation – both things I came to realize too late.

In hindsight, I realize that I was too sure about my own culture. I considered myself an insider within my community and I overestimated my background knowledge. It seems as if I could never quite catch up and close the gap of ignorance, which meant I dragged along behind from the beginning. Throughout my time of conducting the interviews I did not even perceive my own lack of knowledge. I was too focused on other facts, such as language or the number of interviews I wanted to conduct. Furthermore, I did not share my intentions and plans with my advisor, and instead, did all the research on my own. While conducting the interviews I rarely had any scholarly exchange with other students during my stay in Vietnam and in Austria. Given these facts and the meandering path with lots of detours that I have taken, I am quite satisfied with the final outcome.

In the end I have come to realize that I tried to cover too many issues. I could have used more structure and guidance as well as academic input and exchange, and finally, more self-reflection. Although my path was non-traditional, I do not regret my way of proceeding, as I would not want to have missed out on one single experience and mistake I made. Picking my way through the jungle of errors has made me so much more aware of what comes next. Above all I thoroughly enjoyed conducting my research. In a sense, I feel like I have walked right into every trap one can make in one go and through that I am moving closer to what I think I am. |||||

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